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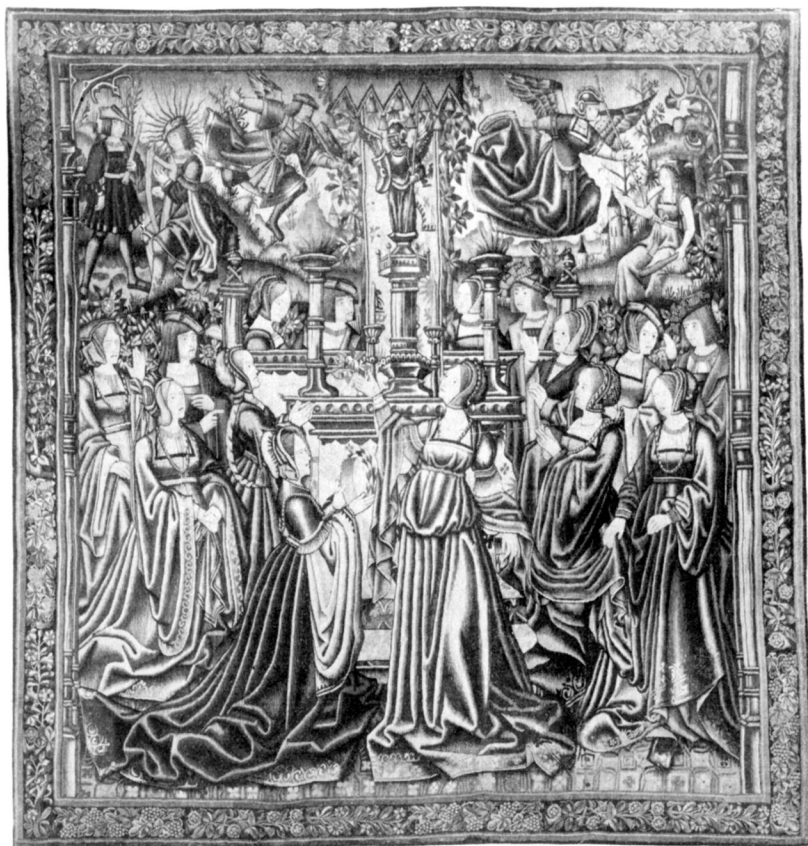
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LATE GOTHIC TAPESTRY

FLEMISH

Bulletin of the City Art Museum of St. Louis

A LATE GOTHIC TAPESTRY

IN January, 1919, the Museum added to its small group of tapestries a typical specimen of the late Gothic period, woven in Flanders in the latter part of the fifteenth century or the opening years of the sixteenth. The drawing and arrangement of the composition, the treatment of draperies and the weaving technique are all in characteristic Gothic style. The subject is apparently a mythological one and has been plausibly explained as representing Daphne at the Temple of Latona. According to this explanation, the central figure is Daphne, offering a floral tribute at the altar of Latona. Inspired by divine impulse, she proclaims, "Women of Thebes, come throng Latona's temple, and give to her and to the children twain, incense and pious prayer, wreathing your hair with laurel. By my mouth Latona speaks." She is accompanied by five women, one of whom kneels to offer her a laurel garland, another holds the end of her mantle, while the others stand in reverential attitudes. On either side and back of the altar are friends of the ill-fated Niobe, some of whom raise their hands in protest against the worship of Latona. It will be recalled that Apollo and Diana, at the suggestion of their mother, Latona, slew the seven sons and seven daughters of Niobe, because the latter boasted herself superior to Latona.

The altar is an elaborate structure with two incense burners and two candlesticks. In the center on an ornate pedestal, beneath a scalloped and tasselled baldachin with a brocaded curtain, is a statuette of a winged Victory, bearing shield and lance and wearing a helmet. Architecturally, the altar shows but slight

traces of Renaissance influence. In the foreground, the customary Gothic verdure is supplanted by tiling.

In the upper left hand corner is a quaint Gothic version of the musical contest between Pan and Apollo, which resulted in the discomfiture of the former. At the right, an angel announces the success of Apollo. In the other upper corner, separated from the previous scene by the baldachin of the altar, is an event derived from the myth of Latona. She is shown seated on the island of Delos, after her weary journeying from place to place among the islands and along the shores of the Aegean Sea, pursued by the Python. She holds in her hand a baton for defense against the Python behind her. In the sky is Iris, bringing a message from Jupiter. The fullness with which all these mythological characters are draped is in marked contrast with later Renaissance designs. The altar cloths are the only stuffs depicted which have figured designs. All the other materials are plain, except for the richly brocaded edgings and borders. The background of the scenes is formed of a narrow strip of sky and landscape with mountains, pointed towers and sparsely leaved trees.

The style of the tapestry indicates that it belongs to the years between 1475 and 1515, which was the period when tapestry weaving reached its greatest degree of perfection in Flanders. Though many tapestries are extant which were woven between these years, there is no method of determining definitely, in the absence of documentary evidence, that any particular one belongs to the fifteenth or to the sixteenth century; inasmuch as the style of the Flemish weavers from 1475 to about 1515 was without radical changes.¹ Dated specimens are

(1) Thomson, *History of Tapestry*, p. 188.

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very rare, and signatures were seldom employed until after the year 1544, when they were required by law. That the Museum's example is later than the third quarter of the fifteenth century is indicated by the orderly grouping of the figures, the balance of the composition, the concentration of interest, and the smaller scale of the groups at the top, characteristics infrequently found in earlier tapestries.

The spirit of the whole composition is, however, still typically Gothic, with few of the Renaissance features which became so popular after 1515, the year when Raphael's cartoons for the Acts of the Apostles were sent by Pope Leo X to the atelier of Peter Van Aelst at Brussels. The composition shows more definite arrangement than earlier specimens; but there is no striving for dramatic force, as in the pieces woven under the influence of the Italian Renaissance painters. The individual manner in which the leaves on the trees in the background are drawn, with no attempt at massing, is significant. The great majority of tapestries known to have been woven after 1500 show a far broader treatment of foliage. The slender columns which frame the panel are Gothic, as is also the predominance of vertical lines and the highly decorative treatment of the deeply folded draperies, which was one of the most beautiful characteristics of the High Gothic Period.

There is no imitation of the style or technique of painting. The tapisier was himself an artist and knew the decorative nature of his task. He filled his composition well, leaving no gaping holes or broad, meaningless expanses of sky, as the copyists of paintings are forced to do. Nor is there any attempt to secure the subtle gradations of color which belong properly to painting and are not suit-

able for tapestry technique. The coloring is extremely simple. The predominating tones in the garments are reds, blues and greens, in from two to three shades. The greens are almost blue in the deep shadows and yellow in the high lights. Black has been used sparingly for some of the darkest shadows of the blue and for outlining. Hair, eyebrows and flesh are shaded with brown. Lips are pink. Architectural details are principally in red. These few simple colors are utilized to their fullest extent by a system of strong hatching which eliminates the necessity for a multitude of tones; and at the same time, in combination with the coarse horizontal ribs (14 to the inch), imparts a delightfully rich texture that the more finely woven tapestries of a later date do not possess. The weft threads are wool and are comparatively coarse in texture. Silk threads of greater fineness have been used for some of the high lights.

The border is narrow with a simple decoration of grape and floral motifs, resembling greatly the border on a similar tapestry, called *A Flemish Garden Party*, lent by the late Mr. Alfred W. Hoyt to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Our example also possesses considerable similarity to the important Gothic tapestry, *The Prophecy of Nathan*, owned by Mr. Edward A. Faust, which was exhibited at the Museum in 1916. The costumes illustrated on the two pieces are almost identical, as an examination of the wide, gracefully flowing sleeves, the borders of garments, headdress, shoes and other details will show.

Our tapestry was formerly owned by M. de Boullay, Saint-Symphorien, Indre-et-Loire, France; and was exhibited by him at the Exposition Retrospective de Tours, 1890.